



Spirit of healing moves on two wheels



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She may glide across the floor in full command of mind and body, but when the music stops she can't even walk across the room. Marie 'Spirit' Synott is a dancer -- on wheels.

Born with spina bifida, a debilitating congenital spinal cord condition, Synott says dancing has always been a fundamental part of her life.

Her mother, Isabel Synott, taught tap, jazz dance and acrobatics to Marie and her five siblings.

"For me it's a form of prayer, expression. It's a real basic need," Synott told CTV News, explaining that she had been in and out of a wheelchair up to the age of 16. Then, she completely lost the ability to walk without assistance.

"At 17 I had surgery that did nerve damage, and that put me permanently in the chair."

Undaunted, Synott pursued her artistic talents, graduating with honours from the Ontario College of Art.

But her love of movement was unshaken -- convinced that the art form least accessible to her would, by the same token, be the most powerful she could explore.

So she chased her dream all the way to solo, duet and ensemble performances at dance festivals including Mayworks, SummerWorks, and Kickstart and alongside artists such as Viv Moore and Rachel Gorman.

And now, Synott is using her passion to inspire others who can't walk.

She's teaching a therapeutic dance class at the Toronto Rehabilitation Centre, determined not to let physical limitations impair people's ability to get moving on the dance floor.

"I want to work with what my students can do. No matter how limited they think they are. I will show them that they're not."

Synott's enthusiasm for dance, life and helping others are intertwined. And she's bursting to share all of it with others.

"I think there's purpose in my being born with disability. There's things I can learn and teach from this position that I couldn't otherwise and I really hope I can make a difference."

Her message resonates with once-reluctant dance therapy participants like Adrian Jackson.

"I was a little tense at first, but when I saw how much fun it was I just loosened up and went with the flow," Jackson said, revelling in the chance to disprove the assumption life in a wheelchair equals life without freedom to move.

Synott's imagination, determination and success has left other therapists impressed as well.

"It's hard to talk about her without saying the word 'spirit' because she comes in and you know she's here and we're going to have fun today," therapeutic recreationist Lynda Charters said.

Synott says she's glad to have that effect on people.

"My biggest frustration is when people are close minded when they have a stereotypical view of what disability means," she said.

"The biggest misconception about being in a chair is people think if your legs don't work the mind doesn't either."

But Synott's proving her doubters wrong -- as a healing spirit with an infectious passion for moving to the beat.

Based on a CTV Success Story by Sandie Rinaldo

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